

Renaissance Art and Literature

The Renaissance began after the plague in the 14th and 15th centuries and was fueled by soldiers returning from the Crusades. There was renewed interest in ancient Greek and Roman art. Human beings were included in artwork. Artwork was no longer just depictions of holy topics. There was new interest in science, the environment and philosophy.

The Printing Press – The “Grand Invention”

Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1445. This invention changed the lives of people in Europe and all over the world. Prior to its invention, books were made by hand. Words were copied and illustrations were all drawn on parchment paper and animal skins that were dried and scraped until they were smooth. This made books very expensive. The printing press could produce books very quickly with little effort. Books were therefore much less expensive and many more people could afford them. With the knowledge imparted in the books, many more people were empowered and as a result many changes began to occur.

Architecture

In the Middle Ages, churches were no longer shaped like crosses. They used the circle to represent the perfection of God. Symmetry became important. In homes, some of the features of the period were courtyards, columns as support structures and domed roofs (a very difficult architectural task).

Painting

Renaissance painters used more realistic depictions than artists in the Middle Ages. The human figure was drawn as realistically as possible, often with backgrounds of nature. There was less emphasis on religious art. Gone were the pictures that had people arranged freely and in came symmetrical groupings. Science helped artists understand the concept of perspective, where objects that were drawn smaller actually looked as if they were farther away. Use of light made figures look real. Famous artists of the time include these men:

- **Botticelli** was a member of the famous Medici family in Florence, Italy. He became very rich as both a goldsmith and an artist, but died penniless. He painted three frescos in the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel. Fresco is the art or technique of painting on a moist plaster surface with colors ground up in water or a limewater mixture.

- **Leonardo da Vinci** is considered to have one of the greatest minds of all times. He was an architect, musician, engineer, scientist, mathematician, botanist and inventor. He invented the first parachute, helicopter, airplane, tank, repeating rifle, swing bridge, paddleboat and motorcar. He painted the famous “Mona Lisa” and “The Last Supper.”
- **Michelangelo** is considered by some to be the greatest artist and sculptor who ever lived. He was a great leader of the Italian Renaissance. His most famous work and his greatest glory was painting the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. It took him four years to do this. The ceiling shows the history of the Old Testament and includes more than 300 figures. He set the standards for sculpting, painting, poetry and architecture.

Music

Science also played a part in the creation of music. Musicians learned how the pitch changes by lengthening or shortening the size of the string on stringed instruments. Once again, symmetry became a part of the music they created. Musicians studied the Greek drama and tried to create music that would go with the words of their stories. This was the beginning of opera, where music and theater are combined.

Literature

Renaissance literature started with a renewed interest in the classical Greek and Roman learning. The invention of the printing press and the weakening of the Catholic Church’s influence on the daily lives of the people, among other things, enabled Renaissance writers to express their beliefs in new ways.

There was an explosion of writing, some of which is deemed the greatest of all time, by these authors and more:

- **Martin Luther**’s book *95 Theses* had a great effect on people. He changed Christianity forever by telling about the abuses of the church by the clergy. He is sometimes known as the “father of Protestantism.”
- **John Calvin** criticized the Catholic Church. He believed that a person has an individual relationship to God. Calvinist churches believe in the simple life and a strong work ethic.
- **Nicolaus Copernicus** wrote a book that proved that the sun did not move around the earth every 24 hours. His book revealed that the earth was not the center of the universe.

- **Leonardo da Vinci's** masterful life is shown in his famed *Notebooks*, which contains his drawings of "things that make the world matter." This is how da Vinci regarded his drawings.
- **St. Ignatius Loyola** wrote a series of five books that defended the church and scolded Luther for his crusade against it.
- **Niccolo Machiavelli** wrote that there is no place for religion or morality in politics in his book *The Prince*. It is believed that "power politics" had its roots in this book.

- **William Shakespeare** is considered one of the greatest writers who ever lived. He wrote at least 37 plays and 154 sonnets. Little is known about his life; however, we do know that he was an actor and performed at the Globe Theater.